

# The Conservative Way of Development

*Seth Kaplan*

## A Failed Prescription

Conservatives have belatedly come to recognize how important international development is to American interests. Since 9/11, it has become increasingly apparent that U.S. national security is under growing threat from a slew of states too weak to look after themselves. Some of these fragile states have become havens for Islamic terrorists; others contain natural resources essential to the American economy; still others have vital strategic significance. If the United States is to protect itself from the fallout of fragile states, it needs to help them achieve long-term stability, security, and even prosperity—in other words, it needs to help them develop. But the West’s standard prescription for development simply has not worked. Might this newly kindled conservative interest in the field lead to a rethinking of how development is approached? Could some of the key tenets of classical conser-

vatism unlock the conundrum of fragile states?

The liberals who play an outsized role in the many multilateral institutions, university departments, and nongovernmental organizations that shape and implement development policies have typically advocated more foreign aid, more individual rights, and more humanitarian intervention as the answer to the problems of the world’s poorest places. These “remedies” may sometimes have made life a little less grim for citizens of fragile states, but have rarely contributed to the construction of stable and prosperous states. Moreover, the liberal approach focuses on symptoms, not on underlying causes; it does little or nothing to address the fundamental problems confronting countries with weak governments and societies divided into competing clans, ethnic groups, and religious sects. Although better schools and health clinics are necessary for development, they alone cannot address the divisions that plague most state-building exercises.

Economic conservatives, whose influence over development strategies is mainly evident in the policies espoused by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and to some degree within national agencies such as USAID, have tradition-

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ally espoused free markets and the roll-back of the state as the keys to economic success everywhere. These prescriptions made sense in countries where governments have suffocated the economy, such as India, China, and the states of the former communist bloc. But such policies are less appropriate in places where the state is almost nonexistent or is too inept or corrupt to fulfill competently its most basic missions (such as providing public services, enacting impartial regulations, and arbitrating between competing factions and companies), as is the case in the weakest places of the poor world. Economic policy matters, of course, but it is only effective in reforming a country that is not already riddled by highly corrupt courts, weak property rights, and rampant insecurity. Faced with such conditions, even the most intrepid of entrepreneurs will look elsewhere to invest.

Whereas conservatives who focus on economic affairs have had some role in shaping development policies, absolutely no part has been played by conservatives who emphasize respect for a society's traditional customs and practices. (The latter used to be called "cultural conservatives," but that label has grown fuzzy of late, and so—for reasons which will soon become apparent—we will call them "cohesive conservatives" here.) David Brooks recently argued in the *New York Times* that since the advent of Barry Goldwater, conservatives who appreciate "the value of networks, institutions and invisible social bonds" and who understand "that people are socially embedded creatures" have retreated to the back of the domestic stage; as for the international stage, one might add, they never even made it through the front door of the theater, leaving the conservative limelight to those who preach the unwavering gospel of individualism.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of conservative setbacks on

the national political scene, some commentators are wondering aloud if inviting these old-fashioned cohesive conservatives onto center stage might not be the way to reinvigorate conservatism. If so, the benefits will accrue not only domestically, but also overseas because the cohesive conservatives' commitment to fostering strong communities and traditional institutions is exactly what is needed to remedy the international community's misconceived approach to development.

### **The Key to Development: Social Cohesion**

All the foreign aid and economic reform in the world will not transform fragile states unless attention is also paid to the social context within which people live and work. It is not a coincidence that the most successful countries in Africa and the Middle East—Botswana, Somaliland, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait—are all built upon traditional identities and institutions accepted by the great majority of their citizens. In contrast, countries whose governments are the least dependent on their indigenous social structures—such as Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Somalia, and Syria—are much more likely to have corrupt officials, illegitimate states, and ineffective systems of governance.

As cohesive conservatives would instinctively appreciate, development is a group process and needs to be firmly rooted in communities that possess strong social networks, durable shared loyalties, widely accepted institutions, and deep reservoirs of social capital (social capital consists of the norms and networks that enable people to act collectively). As Adam Ferguson, David Hume, Adam Smith, and other leading lights of the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment articulated, social order and progress depend on a com-

plex network of institutions—law, habit, morals, customs, and impersonal social forces—that are the result of a prolonged “process of cumulative growth,” to quote a much more recent philosopher, Friedrich Hayek in *The Constitution of Liberty*.<sup>2</sup>

More recently still, David Brooks explained in 2007 that “the temperamental conservative values social cohesion alongside individual freedom and worries that too much individualism, too much segmentation, too much tension between races and groups will tear the underlying unity on which all else depends. Without unity, the police are regarded as alien powers, the country will fracture under the strain of war and the economy will be undermined by lack of social trust.”<sup>3</sup>

The functioning of each institution and relationship cannot be understood as an isolated phenomenon and must instead be seen in the context of the particular set of working arrangements within which that institution sits. States and societies grow strong when they are firmly rooted in existing, stable institutions and not built upon untried concepts and projects; reform is possible, but it is not desirable when it necessitates a radical break with the past. As the nineteenth-century British Conservative prime minister Benjamin Disraeli declared, “In a progressive country change is constant; and the great question is not whether you should resist change which is inevitable but whether that change should be carried out in deference to the manners, the customs, the laws, the traditions of the people, or in deference to abstract principles and arbitrary and general doctrines.”<sup>4</sup> Disraeli’s wisdom was reaffirmed a century later by the formidable conservative intellectual Michael Oakeshott in his book *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*: “An innovation which is a response to some specific defect, one designed to redress some specific disequilibrium, is more desirable

than one which springs from a notion of a generally improved condition of human circumstances, and is far more desirable than one generated by a vision of perfection.”<sup>5</sup> None of these insights, however, features prominently in the international community’s policies for promoting development.

### **Making the Problem Worse**

Western foreign ministries and aid agencies, together with the World Bank and other parts of the United Nations system, have in fact pursued a top-down development agenda that often inadvertently undermines the cultural solidarity of local peoples. By following a set of abstract and general principles and not paying sufficient attention to local sociopolitical conditions, Western efforts to help these troubled places have repeatedly promoted policies that actually end up decimating local social structures and undermining homegrown governing capacities—the very elements that should be forming the building blocks for states to advance.

For instance, the international community has tried no fewer than fifteen times since the dissolution of the Somali state in 1991 to rebuild it in a top-down fashion, even though a bottom-up approach that takes advantage of long-standing and widely accepted clan structures is far more likely to create a viable state. Somaliland, the secessionist territory in the northwest of Somalia that declared independence in 1991, has managed to create the most democratic state in the region partly because it has had little outside help—and has therefore been forced to depend on its own resources, capacities, and institutions. Yet the international community persists in laboring toward a national solution, and refuses to recognize Somaliland despite its undeniable success. Similarly, the recent UN-coordinated program to stabilize

the DRC concentrated first and foremost on national elections—at the cost of over \$500 million—even though a regionally based, deeply decentralized state structure is more likely to empower this geographically, linguistically, and ethnically divided country. This obsession with trying to create centralized states in fragmented countries exacerbates existing ethnic, religious, and tribal divisions; encourages an unhealthy dependency on foreign aid; undermines whatever governing capacities local peoples have developed on their own; and torpedoed the chances of fragile states ever becoming self-sufficient.

The international community's agenda for political reform has focused almost always on a swift transition to democracy—which is almost invariably defined as free national elections, even if a more gradual and decentralized approach is more likely not to disrupt the weak social bonds that tie fragmented societies together. Overcentralizing power has, in fact, often reduced the ability of relatively cohesive local communities to hold their governments accountable. At the same time, an overemphasis on individual civil and political liberties ignores the need to limit the inflammatory rhetoric some leaders use to stoke ethnic and religious conflict for personal advantage. In the words of David Cameron, the current British Conservative Party leader, “individual freedoms count for little if society is disintegrating.”<sup>6</sup>

Western governments and UN agencies have precluded the evolution of any organic process of reform led by local communities and driven by local resources. Indeed, the development community's arrogant conviction that only Western funding and Western policy formulation can overcome the problems faced by weak African, Asian, and Latin American states has discouraged the reorganization of states in ways that

would make them more suitable to local conditions while creating unaccountable corps of local and international bureaucrats. The standard prescription for development has in fact perpetuated the most artificial aspects of postcolonial states, preventing them from developing real ties to their own citizens.

### **How to Make Things Better**

As Edmund Burke and other classical conservatives would surely argue, the key to fixing fragile states is not to prop up artificially the state but to enmesh it within the surrounding society. People in underdeveloped countries have enormous political, socioeconomic, and cultural resources built up over centuries that can serve as the foundation for development. The U.S. military, for instance, made great strides stabilizing Iraq after it started working with centuries-old indigenous tribal institutions and deemphasized its previous effort to introduce a completely new—and mainly foreign—top-down governing model.<sup>7</sup>

Reform needs to be introduced in a manner that responds to and builds upon the historical norms and institutions of a community for it to be desirable and effective. As Oakeshott explains, “The more closely an innovation resembles growth (that is, the more clearly it is intimated in and not merely imposed upon the situation) the less likely it is to result in a preponderance of loss.”<sup>8</sup>

A conservative approach that balances cohesive communities with individualism, order with freedom, and traditional social structures and networks with Western-style governing and economic systems would radically alter the development agenda. Foreign aid and economic plans would relinquish their paramount positions on that agenda, and would henceforth feature alongside, or even below, initiatives to

integrate the state with local institutions, build capacity at the bottom tiers of government, make better use of indigenous governing capacities, and bridge ethnic and religious divides. In short, fragile states would be encouraged to discover within themselves the resources to achieve their own salvation. Outside efforts to help would aim to complement and catalyze these resources, not replace them, as is the case today.

In its hands-off approach, President Bush's Millennium Challenge Account (an innovative aid scheme established in 2004) encourages progress toward some of these goals. By rewarding good governance and responding to proposals initiated by grant recipients themselves, the Millennium Challenge Account gives states an incentive to reorganize themselves to serve their citizens better.<sup>9</sup> However, President Bush's scheme offers no help to the most dysfunctional countries that have no hope of qualifying under its criteria.

*Strengthening Local Communities,  
Building States Bottom-Up*

Instead of seeking to build generic top-down governing bodies with little consideration for their social context, the international community should be assisting local peoples to construct governments appropriate to their circumstances. This would in turn often lead to a greater emphasis on bottom-up state building and decentralization.

Building greatly empowered regional governments around communities with a common identity—such as the Kurds in Iraq—is far more likely to succeed than attempts to place all authority in central governments, which are typically torn asunder in fractured societies.

Even communities that contain a variety of identity groups stand to benefit from efforts to construct states from the bot-

tom up, emphasizing local accountability. Urban and regional governments are far more likely to form inclusive coalitions and advance an agenda beneficial to all sections of the population than are national regimes, especially in sprawling countries such as the DRC and Sudan. These states' leaders have little incentive to serve distant areas populated by disparate groups, whom those leaders regard more as competitors for government control than as compatriots. Moreover, distance markedly decreases the accountability of officials in weakly unified countries. Government spending in fragile states is often lavished on the capital city for the simple reason that only the people living there can pose a tangible threat to the ruling elite. In the DRC, for example, Kinshasa has always received much better public services than any other part of the country.

Far more effort should also be placed on trying to integrate local customs, laws, and traditions with government, instead of simply trying to ignore, emasculate, or overturn them. Where they remain robust, traditional institutions are much more likely than imported modern state structures to maintain and foster the communal harmony and moral virtue necessary to build social capital and a united commitment to a program of reform. Mali, for example, has done much better than its neighbors precisely because it has been able to incorporate traditional institutions directly into its state structures.

*Building National Identity*

At the national level, states with a diverse population need help in creating a robust national identity. Although nationalism is looked down upon by some (especially in liberal circles), it is the bedrock of strong states. Ethnic, religious, or tribal groups could be forced to work together in national coalition governments, as Kenya was urged

to do in the wake of its 2007–2008 election turmoil. Measures that encourage a national outlook, such as the introduction of national service or a policy of regularly moving government employees to different parts of the country, would enhance cohesion. Sports and television have a role to play here too; Nelson Mandela, for instance, used the 1995 Rugby World Cup to help reconcile resentful blacks and fearful whites. Ensuring that government money and services are distributed fairly across disparate groups (something the international community rarely considers) could also help reduce social fractures.

#### *Security before Elections*

In states where rapid change may be detrimental to stability, emphasis should be given to encouraging gradual, incremental reform that introduces a variety of mechanisms to hold governments more accountable, to integrate them more closely with their societies, and to make them more dependent on their citizens. While elections are an important tool in ensuring that leaders and governments work to benefit their populations, they have been overemphasized at the expense of other instruments that could encourage better governance—and that are more likely to be practical in the short and medium term.

As the Iraq experience vividly shows, dramatic change—including abrupt moves to fully competitive elections—in states with fragile institutions and a history of intergroup animosity can be highly explosive, creating instability that undermines the whole reform agenda. In Syria, for instance, rapid democratization would be counterproductive, increasing divisive competition between groups that the state's corrupted and maladministered governing structures would find hard to accommodate. Unity and security must be the top priorities, and far-reaching reforms

should be introduced only gradually, as the evolving institutional and sociopolitical context allows.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Using Aid to Stimulate, Not Overwhelm*

Outside assistance should be dispensed so that it complements local political and economic processes and avoids overwhelming internally generated resources. Rather than disbursing aid in large dollops to meet externally mandated goals, aid should be extended in small amounts and in ways that reinforce—not distort—the relationship between governments and their peoples. Except in humanitarian crises, foreign aid should form no more than a modest share of the budgets of government at all levels of administration and should be directed at fortifying existing state–society linkages, even if this means sacrificing some of the effectiveness of material assistance in the short term. For example, aid could be given on a matching basis only and where possible in kind or as technical expertise. Funding for self-help schemes originating among community groups could be accorded a higher priority than financial support for foreign-managed nongovernmental organizations. Foreign assistance must not, however, completely circumvent government; such a separation prolongs the weakness of the state, and prevents it from playing its essential (though not dominant) role in nurturing a society's institutions.

Initiatives that broadened the government's capacity would have multiplier effects on many levels. Increasing decentralization, improving local administration, and training ministry officials would enhance the government's ability to connect with its citizens. Strengthening the legislature and judiciary in ways that bolstered the rule of law and the checks that society can impose on executive authority would increase a society's ability to hold its

leaders accountable. Reducing corruption and building revenue-collection capabilities would provide the government with more resources.

Wherever possible, foreign aid should not replace taxes, as is often the case today, but rather supplement them. Taxes should be the centerpiece of state building because they force governments to make policy by negotiating with local companies and interest groups, directly improving the state-society compact.

As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recently stated, “The most persistent and potentially dangerous threats [to U. S. national security] will come less from emerging ambitious states, than from failing ones that cannot meet the basic

needs—much less the aspirations—of their people.”<sup>11</sup> To safeguard itself, the United States needs to help these countries help themselves to develop. To this end, it is high time that conservatives recognized that their own values offer the key to a successful development strategy.

Fragile states do not need more aid. What they do need is international assistance that makes them more (not less) self-reliant, better able to take advantage of their own resources, to build upon their own customs and traditions, and to leverage their own social capital. International assistance will prove beneficial only when it helps local citizens foster the self-sufficient, cohesive societies necessary for states to work effectively.

<sup>1</sup> David Brooks, “The Social Animal,” *New York Times*, September 12, 2008. <sup>2</sup> Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 57. <sup>3</sup> Brooks, “The Republican Collapse,” *New York Times*, October 5, 2007. <sup>4</sup> “Speech at Edinburgh on Reform Bill, October 1867,” in *Selected Speeches of the Late Right Honourable the Earl of Beaconsfield*, ed. Thomas Edward Keble (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1882), 487. <sup>5</sup> Michael Oakeshott, “On Being Conservative,” in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1962), 172. <sup>6</sup> “In Full: Cameron’s Speech on Childhood,” *Daily Telegraph*, March 27,

2007. <sup>7</sup> See, for example, Greg Jaffe, “Midlevel Officers Show Enterprise in Iraq,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 29, 2007, and David Rohde, “Army Enlists Anthropology in War Zones,” *New York Times*, October 5, 2007. <sup>8</sup> Oakeshott, “On Being Conservative,” 172. <sup>9</sup> For more information, see <http://www.mcc.gov/>. <sup>10</sup> See Seth Kaplan, “A New U.S. Policy for Syria: Fostering Political Change in a Divided State,” *Middle East Policy* 15, No. 3 (Fall 2008): 107–21. <sup>11</sup> For the full text of Gates’s speech, delivered in Washington, D. C. on July 15, 2008, see <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1262>.